

In the public eye

by Brigitte Desrochers and François Lachapelle

A new policy in support of architecture by the Canada Council for the Arts reflects important new directions in contemporary practice.

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Over fifty years ago, Vincent Massey noted in the report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (1951) that “*Canadians are too little aware of the power of the architect to enliven and enrich their lives.*” He recommended that an Arts Council be created in Canada, and that its mandate should include architecture, because he believed it to be “*of the first importance to arouse public interest and develop public understanding on a matter of such universal consequence.*” This original mandate stands at the core of the Canada Council’s new architecture policy. Marco Polo informed the readers of *Canadian Architect* of the broad strokes of this new policy in an earlier issue of this magazine (see Viewpoint, CA March 2003). He invited us to elaborate for readers the reasons behind this new policy and its implementation: it is a pleasure to respond to his invitation.

First, we need to summarize the history of the Council’s intervention in the field of architecture. Over time, the institution has adapted to the realities of practice: it supported modernist architects in the 1950s and ’60s, it adjusted its programs to meet the needs of the “paper architects” that emerged in the post-modern era, and it is now responding to recent important transformations in the nature of cutting edge architectural research. This affects three issues in particular: the changing relationship between critics and practitioners; the changing relationship between architects and the building industry; and the changing relationship between architects and the public at large.

This diagnosis of the state of contemporary practice in Canada was reached after a thorough and extremely stimulating read of editorials and opinion pieces in architecture journals and magazines from the last 15 years. The 150 architects who attended the Visual Arts Service’s pan-Canadian consultation in 2000 greatly contributed to the process, as did a series of consultations with professional policy-makers within Council. When a clear picture emerged of what might constitute a good architecture policy, it was submitted to the scrutiny of respected figures in the Canadian architecture scene and presented for approval by the Board of the Canada Council for the Arts. The policy is now being implemented, with the creation of two new grants programs and the undertaking of an ambitious campaign of promotion of architectural excellence among federal commissioning agencies. Practitioners, critics and curators of architecture can contribute a great deal to the success of this enterprise. A common understanding of the challenges Canadian architecture faces, on its way to artistic excellence, should make for a good starting point to the coming years of collaboration between the architecture community and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Historical Overview

The Canada Council’s first grants in support of architecture respected the spirit of its founding document, the Massey report cited above. One of the first grants went to Moshe Safdie, an emerging architect who committed himself to developing significant responses to the alarming predictions of overpopulations that so concerned planners and politicians in the late 1960s. Young as he was at the time, he found enough support to translate his ideas into built form, on the occasion of Expo ’67 with the construction of Habitat. Many Canadians still carry very fond memories of the event and the thoughtful, even poetic responses that Expo brought to the challenges of modernization.

Soon after, as happened in most industrialized countries, the Modern movement underwent a disenchantment, even a crisis: dull and strictly utilitarian structures multiplied at the core of major cities, disrupting historical continuity and dissolving urban spaces into inhospitable wind tunnels. Many architects sensed that their medium had been robbed of its artistic dimension by thoughtless developers and careless citizens.

From the '70s to the '90s, architects distanced themselves from what they had grown to perceive as the abrasive forces of the marketplace. According to Margaret Crawford, "the narrowing of architectural practice has been balanced by an expanding architectural avant-garde, who, opposing the corruption of architecture by business, takes on roles closer to that of the artist. Avoiding the inevitable 'contamination' of the professional world of building, these architects survive through teaching, publication, competitions, and the growing niche in the art market for architectural drawings and models." ("Can architects be socially responsible?", in Diane Ghirardo, *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture*, Bay Press, 1991.)

At the same time, the Visual Arts Section of the Canada Council for the Arts was designing its programs in support of "paper architects" (as they called themselves) who formed a vital leading edge to the profession throughout the '70s and '80s.

A new generation of enlightened patrons of architecture eventually responded to their plea, and helped bring their ideas back into the public realm in the form of buildings. From the '90s to the present, architects responded to the new opportunities by developing their practices in the social world through the act of building. Consequently, the Canada Council has retooled its programs in support of architecture to address three major areas of activity: new directions in critical practice, relationships with building partners, and relationships with the general public.

New Directions in Critical Practice

Not too long ago, Marxist theories inherited from the Frankfurt School, structuralist models developed from linguistic theory, along with the post-structuralist philosophy of Jacques Derrida and his followers demanded that critical thinking precede and guide design. Theoreticians of architecture claimed authority over practitioners until Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and various other vitalist philosophers proposed that our societies are far too complex to be put in the nutshell of a prescriptive framework. From this point onwards it made sense, again, for theoreticians to stop leading and start following the explorations of practitioners. A new generation of writers has begun to investigate the factual qualities of architecture, to valorize craft and materials, scrutinize the rhetorical functions of construction details, and investigate a building's relationship with site and climate. Wilfried Wang provided a beautiful example of this new critical approach in "On the Edge," his introduction to *Architecture Canada 1999: The Governor General Awards for Architecture* (Tuns University Press, 2000).

As a result of this new focus on built work practitioners acquired much more autonomy with respect to critics, but the latter remain essential to the dynamics of genuine, artistic research. When they transpose a building into text and images, critics, photographers and editors help architects to identify the cardinal principles of their research, to situate their work in relation to that of their colleagues and to reflect on the manner in which their practice addresses the challenges of the contemporary world. The prodigious rise of Swiss architecture in the 1990s owes much to the productive interaction of practicing architects and theoreticians: each firm knew that in order to gain recognition, it had to bring something to the state of the art, as defined by its five or six most recent buildings. Each new contribution was masterfully photographed, skillfully criticized, and quickly disseminated around the country by the architecture presses. In this way editors, critics, photographers and architects all engage one another in a dynamic that stimulates invention and ties architecture to emerging challenges in the management and the development of the Swiss environment. The involvement of many professionals, each of whom look at architecture with slightly different eyes and prompt one another to action, is essential to the making of a lively and productive architecture scene.

Unfortunately, the Canadian network for writing, photographing and publishing architecture is so underdeveloped in comparison with foreign networks that a true synergy between practitioners and critics has not taken hold.

The absence of a dynamic flow of images of and ideas about Canadian architecture impedes the formation of a true *avant-garde* movement in this country. John Patkau has insisted upon the importance of “a vital leading edge... for the future development of our discipline.” He has argued that “we have been extremely complacent in this regard, living on ideas and images developed in other places... To be sure, there are many reasons for this problem, beginning, at the top, with the bankruptcy of cultural leadership in the public sector” (see “Playing it Safe,” *CA*, December 2000).

As part of the Canada Council’s new architecture policy, a new grant program has been created to engender a more dynamic relationship between practitioners, critics and curators of architecture. The projects submitted to the first edition of the grant program are extremely encouraging. At the time of writing, a roster of extremely solid projects from the country’s best offices is on its way to being juried by a peer assessment committee.

Relations with Building Partners

Building materials and construction techniques are the flesh and bones of architecture. Renewed emphasis on the craft of building has made itself felt through exhibitions such as *Issues of Gravity: a Study in Collaboration* by the University of British Columbia’s School of Architecture, and *Canadian and Japanese Designs for Living: Pushing the Boundaries Between Design, Craft and Art* by the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design. In the marketplace, however, architects can rarely give free rein to their creative ambitions with respect to the techniques of construction. “Commencing in the early 1970s” writes the distinguished structural engineer Morden Yolles, “a number of major changes have occurred within architectural and construction practice. It is these changes that have so deeply affected the Architect/Engineer/Constructor interchange and have tended to suppress creative dialogue” (see “Simple Gifts,” *CA* November 1996). Architects are less and less involved in the design of building components, and developers merely see them, as David Podmore says, as “one branch in our operation with a particular task of coordinating the design function” (see “Public Exposure,” *CA*, January 1996).

The Canada Council for the Arts will take action to improve architects’ access to interesting commissions, to heighten the quality of commissions across the country and stimulate public recognition of the art of architecture. With regard to the first issue--access to commissions--young firms suffer the most from the difficulty of accessing interesting work. This problem is all the more acute since, according to Barry Sampson, “emerging small and medium sized practices... are producing almost all of the architecturally significant work in this country” (see “Size Matters,” *CA* December 1999).

Regarding the quality of commissions, the federal government has become the biggest and least interesting architecture client in Canada. The Canada Council for the Arts will take on the challenge of championing architectural quality in other offices of the federal government, and promote architecture competitions.

Relations with the Public

As long as the public does not recognize the part architecture plays in their lives, architects will receive meager commissions. According to Brigitte Shim, “Private individuals with the will and desire to facilitate good architecture at a smaller scale” are bred in societies that value the art of architecture. These individuals “have been generators of some of the most significant experiments of the Modern movement, having aided in redefining our understanding of architecture” (see “The Usual Suspects,” *CA* December 1998). Architecture prizes offered by the Canada Council, such as the Prix de Rome and the Ronald J. Thom Award, publicly recognize

the quest for excellence in architecture. However, these will not suffice to break the general apathy regarding the mediocrity of our cities and towns. Too many Canadians accept characterless spaces, allowing both private and public developers to go about their business without paying heed to architecture.

The Canada Council's new program of Assistance to the Promotion of Architecture is meant to help raise the public profile of Canadian architects and to let the public enjoy their built work. It will help publishers, galleries and museums produce high-quality books, exhibitions and events targeting a broad public. Application guidelines will be made available this summer, and the first deadline will take place on 1 October of this year.

Renewed Support for Architecture

To have a positive influence on contemporary practice, the Canada Council for the Arts will operate on all levels of the architecture network: within the community, by strengthening criticism, publication and public debate; among the working partners of architects, by forming strategic alliances with public and private agencies involved in the commissioning of buildings, and by supporting competitions; and among the general public, through prizes, exhibitions, and publications that will make people more aware of what Vincent Massey described as "the power of the architect to enliven and enrich their lives" and allow for a better enjoyment of this art form. In standing true to its original mandate in support of architecture, the Canada Council for the Arts is confident that it will find a great many contemporary works to celebrate, a number of institutional partners to collaborate with, and a very broad segment of the Canadian public interested in learning, discussing, and enjoying an art form that so closely embraces fundamental aspects of everyday existence.

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